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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2666
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000891

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2016

TAGS: ASEC ETTC IS KPAO IE PREL PTER

SUBJECT: MGLE01: AMBASSADOR DELIVERS DEMARCHE ON
DESIGNATION OF AL-MANAR, LEBANESE MEDIA GROUP, AND AL-NOUR
RADIO

REF: STATE 44261

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)

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¶1. (S/NF) On March 21, the Ambassador and econoff delivered reftel demarche to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and advisers Mohammad Chattah and Roula Noureddine (other topics reported septel). Siniora listened carefully and stoically as the Ambassador presented the demarche. Siniora was not enthusiastic about the demarche but responded calmly. He said he did not agree with the action, but he understood it.

¶2. (S/NF) Claiming to put his own disagreement aside in order to speak "objectively," Siniora expressed his concern that this US effort against Hizballah-linked media outlets will bring counter-productive results. Siniora said that the demarche, when made public, will only increase the audience of Hizballah's media outlets as a reaction to perceived US interference. Siniora made it clear he was not defending Hizballah or its media outlets, but was concerned that the Lebanese people would see the USG as defending Israeli interests. Noureddine added that some Lebanese would feel that the USG is trying to shut down freedom of speech. The Ambassador replied that the cause of the demarche was related mostly to the fundraising capabilities of the media outlets for a terrorist group, although the programming and its ugly content were also mentioned.

¶3. (S/NF) Siniora was especially apprehensive about the timing of the USG designation. The public announcement on March 23 will come just the national dialogue is meeting to tackle the two most contentious issues: Hizballah's arms and the presidency. Hizballah may use the designation as a part of its ongoing effort to portray itself a victim of foreign interference, Siniora suggested. Hizballah might accuse the USG of trying to torpedo the national dialogue. Chattah opined that the USG intended message might be lost in the resulting furor.

¶4. (S/NF) Siniora continued that USG actions such as this are not helpful. It will further increase the rift in the country. People are still upset about the Israeli raid on the Jericho jail and perceived US and UK collusion in the raid, Siniora added. For Hizballah to give up its weapons, Lebanon will need some kind of international guarantees, Siniora suggested. But the Jericho raid makes Hizballah question any talk of international guarantees. The US decision against Hizballah's media outlets will make Hizballah even more suspicious of U.S. intentions. Chattah added that no one in Lebanon would understand why the US is

moving against media outlets, when the "military wing" of Hizballah is the problem.

COMMENT

¶ 15. (S/NF) In general, our Lebanese interlocutors, including Siniora, agree with the USG on one important issue regarding Hizballah and disagree with us on a second. They agree with us that Hizballah's arms pose a serious problem and are relieved that the taboo prohibiting public questioning of those arms has fallen away. This is a much-welcome development that has occurred over the last six months, as more and more people (taking political cover in many cases behind Walid Jumblatt's statements) question the traditional "resistance" justification for Hizballah's weapons. It would have been inconceivable as recently as December to imagine all of Lebanon's top politicians agreeing to table the question of Hizballah's weapons in a national dialogue. The Lebanese recognize that, per UNSCR 1559, there is also an international consensus that Hizballah must disarm. Disarmament appears to be neither quick nor easy, but at least the subject can now be discussed.

¶ 16. (S/NF) But, while concurring that Hizballah must be somehow disarmed, our Lebanese contacts disagree with our definition of Hizballah as a terrorist organization. In terms of the civil war attacks against our facilities and citizens, the Lebanese do not distinguish between Hizballah's crimes and those committed by others -- all, they argue, are in the past and should be overlooked, lest the civil war reignite. (Even by Lebanese legal standards, however, there is a distinction: the amnesty law adopted in 1991 that forgave all civil war crimes exempted crimes against

BEIRUT 00000891 002 OF 002

diplomatic facilities from that amnesty.) In terms of Hizballah's current international reach, the Lebanese reject the notion that Hizballah is aiding Palestinian and Iraqi terrorists. As we have not been able to share details given the need to protect sources and methods, the Lebanese fully attribute our allegations in this regard to Israeli propaganda. In addition, hard as we try to demonstrate why this division is factually ludicrous, the Lebanese persist in their fantasy that the ("acceptable") civilian institutions of Hizballah can and should be separated from the ("unacceptable") military wing. With up to 30 percent of Lebanon's citizens (and an overwhelming majority of its Shia population) loyal to Hizballah, non-Hizballah politicians want to avoid outright confrontation with Hizballah in favor of encouraging an evolution away from its armed activities.

¶ 17. (S/NF) Thus, we expect that, once the designation announcement is made, we will have no support for our decision and will face much opposition in Lebanon regarding it. Like Siniora, our contacts will undoubtedly argue (however weak their logic) that our action against a "civilian" institution makes it harder to accomplish the goal we all share -- the dismantling of Hizballah's militia and arsenals. Confident in its near-monopoly on Shia political life in Lebanon, Hizballah will use our designation to reinforce with the Shia population the fiction that the U.S. is somehow "anti-Shia" in Lebanon. We will look for effective ways to combat this perception here.

¶ 18. (S/NF) But in addition to our public rollout of this decision, we hope Washington will provide more details than are available in reftel on Hizballah's terrorist activities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in Iraq, to share with key GOL officials and Lebanese politicians. Aware of the hundreds of Israeli air and sea violations since 2000 (which are, of course, directly linked to the existence of Hizballah's arms -- another fact conveniently overlooked by the Lebanese) and convinced that Sheba'a Farms remain occupied Lebanese territory, Lebanese see Hizballah's Blue Line skirmishes as understandable, even at times justified.

But we think that hard evidence of Hizballah involvement in Israeli-Palestinian and Iraqi violence will frighten the Lebanese and shift them in our direction.

FELTMAN